

Employee Engagement in India and China: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

In today's scenario when every economy is facing the war for talent, the two most emerging economies of the world i.e. India and China are also facing the brunt of this acute problem. However, in this perspective, employee engagement has been emerged as a strong strategic decision to solve the issue at a larger extent. Through various surveys and research, it has been established that engaged employee is one of the top priority for HR managers globally.

Employee engagement has been defined and measured many times, yet there is a lack of knowledge regarding the background issues which affect the level of engagement. The present study, based on secondary data, aims to explore the ground level issues which affected the employee engagement level in India and China during 2011 and 2012. The study finds that in these two countries, employee engagement has been affected by organizational and economic issues both for short and long term. But simultaneously, culture of the country also plays a very important role in determining the engagement level. It also affects the employees' perception about the drivers which they consider as the priority issues, essential for keeping and motivating them to be engaged.

Keywords:

Employees Engagement, Satisfaction, India, China, Culture.

Introduction

Employee Engagement: Need of the hour

Traditionally better services, innovative products, corporate strategies or better pay packages are assumed as the driving factors of organizational success and growth. However, now a days scenario has changed. Now, each one of these factors is directly or indirectly depends on one component, on whose quality and performance, survival, success and growth of a company depends. This component is the Human Resources of a company i.e. the people who work for the company.

Gone by the days when human resources were known only for

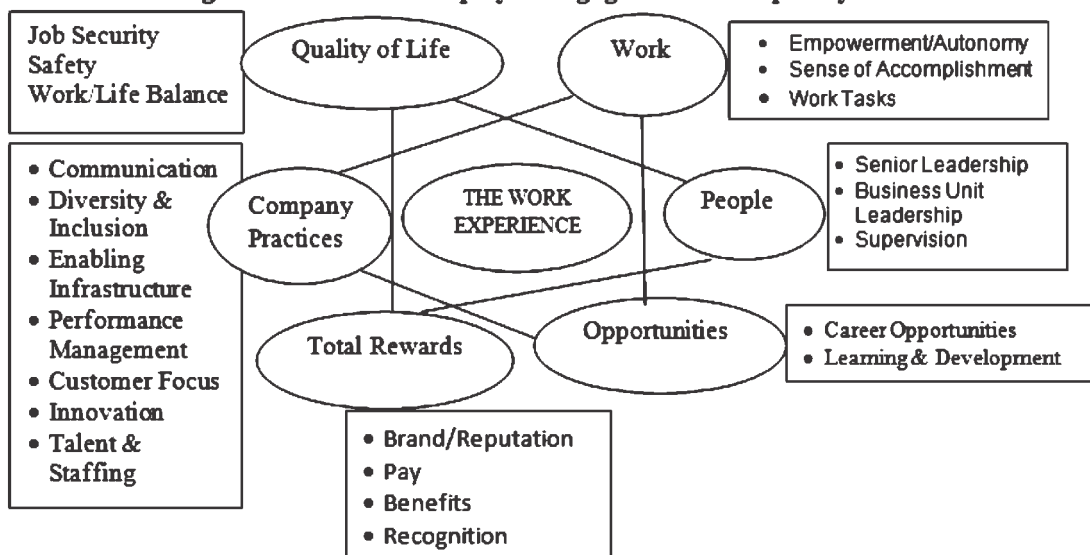
supportive functions, now it has emerged as the most critical asset to be handled in an organization. Getting right talent is only one side of the coin but to explore their potential and to make them engaged has turned up as the hottest issue of the present time, as Swarnalatha and Prasanna (2013) have also discussed that “the challenge today is not just retaining talented people, but fully engaging them, capturing their minds and hearts at each stage of their work lives.” This is because employees who are engaged in their work and committed to their organizations give crucial competitive advantages including higher productivity and lower employee turnover (Robert, 2006). Similarly, Singh and Panda (Jan, 2013) have discussed that in uncertain times, organizations need to focus on harnessing the discretionary effort that make the employees engaged. It differentiates the caliber of companies to face the economic downturn and to get out of it.

Employee Engagement: A Conceptual Framework

Employee Engagement has been described with different views in the literature. Some authors have considered it as

the positive, affective psychological work-related state of mind that leads employees to actively express and invest themselves emotionally, cognitively and physically in their role performance (Kahn, 1990; Catlette and Hadden, 2001; Rurkkhum, 2010) while Truss et al. (2006) have defined it in a very simple way i.e. employee engagement is 'passion for work'. Similar to the academia, the concept of employee engagement has got huge attention in the industry also because of its linkage with the individual and business outcomes (Stroud, 2009). Various research and consultation firms have searched this concept in a detailed manner and have provided different opinions. For example, Harter et al. (2002) from the Gallup Organization defined employee engagement as “an individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work” (p. 269). Similarly, Hewitt Associates defined employee engagement as “the state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organization as measured by three primary behaviors: Say, Stay and Strive” (Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps, n.d., p. 2). It has given a model of employee engagement drivers also.

Figure 1: Drivers of Employee Engagement developed by Hewitt

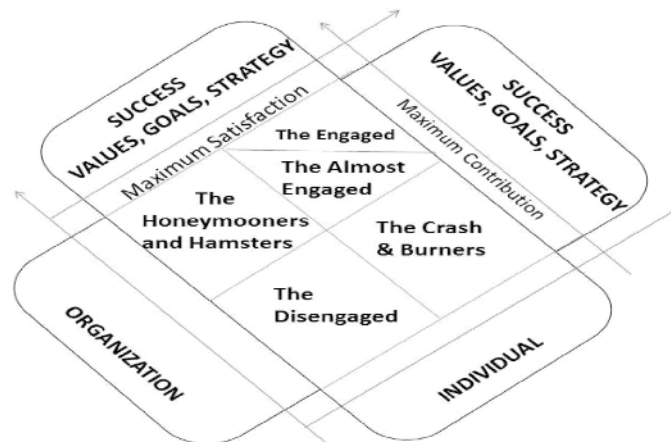


Source: 2013 Trends in Asia Pacific Employee Engagement, p.4

On the other hand, Blessing White (2013) has defined employee engagement through an alignment of maximum job satisfaction (“I like my work and I do it well”) with

maximum job contribution (“I help in achieving the goals of my organization) and have developed X model of employee engagement which has been shown below.

Figure 2: X Model of Employee Engagement



Source: Report on Employee Engagement, 2013 by Blessing White (p.4)

On the basis of model, Blessing White (2013) has classified the employees among five categories. They are:

a) The Engaged: Employee at the apex level with the alignment of personal and organizational interest; at the position of **high contribution and high satisfaction**.

b) Almost Engaged: High performers and reasonably satisfied but do not have consistency in performance; at the position of **medium to high contribution and satisfaction**.

c) Honeymooners and Hamsters: Honeymooners are new to the organization and their contribution areas and levels are yet to be explored. Hamsters are those who work hard but mostly on non-contributing tasks; at the position of **high satisfaction but low contribution**.

d) Crash and Burners: Those who have worked hard and potentially exhausted but have not achieved their personal definition of success and satisfaction; at the position of **high contribution but low satisfaction**.

e) The Disengaged: Those who are mostly disconnected from organizational priorities; often feels underutilized and are not clear about the way to contribute; at the position of **low contribution and satisfaction**.

Review of Literature

As discussed, various research and consulting agencies have done some large scale surveys and have measured engagement level and its impact across all over the world. For example, by studying 142 countries worldwide, Gallup has presented in its report *State of the Global Workplace* (Oct, 2013) that in 2011-12 only 13% employees were engaged worldwide. However, engagement levels among employees vary across different global regions and among countries within those regions. By using meta analysis method, it has also presented a report in Feb. 2013 and

discussed that nine performance outcomes i.e. customer ratings; profitability; productivity; turnover (for high and low-turnover organizations); safety incidents; shrinkage (theft); absenteeism; patient safety incidents; quality (defects) are strongly correlated with employee engagement across different organizations from diverse industries and regions of the world. Similarly, Right Management (2009) has also conducted a major study of engagement among 28,810 employees representing a broad range of industry sectors from 15 countries of Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific. The study revealed that an organization's culture, strategy execution, leadership ability, structure and processes are all inter-related with engagement levels. Similarly, study by Towers Perrin (2003) has presented a useful comparison among a range of demographic segments from job level to industry category. It has found a pattern across the segments. Each group had only a small group of highly engaged respondents, a slightly larger disengaged group, with the majority in the moderately engaged group.

(i) Focus and Plan of the Present Study

In the same line, as discussed in review of literature, various other research agencies have conducted research for employee engagement at a wide level and they have included various countries simultaneously in one study. However, the present study focuses especially on the (i) employee engagement status in India and China and (ii) tries to identify the major issues affecting the employee engagement. It is divided into five sections. First and second sections explain the need and conceptual framework of employee engagement. Third section deals with literature of review. Fourth section is divided into three sub parts and concentrates on the focus and plan of the study, used data and methodology, and finally the analysis and comparison. The last and fifth section deals with discussion and

conclusion followed by limitations and scope of further research. Being a kind of exploratory study, it tries to find out the background issues which are responsible for the status of employee engagement in these two countries during 2011 and 2012. The reason behind the selection of only India and China for study purpose is that these two countries are the two most populous countries in the world and now two of the fastest growing economies also. As the study by Goldman Sachs (Nov., 2007 cited from Wikipedia) has presented that in 2050, China will be the largest economy of the world with GDP of 70,710 US\$ billions and United States, India, Brazil and Russia will be the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6 largest economies. It predicts that China may overtake the United States to become the largest economy in the world by 2027 and India may overtake Japan to become the third largest economy as early as 2027. *In fact in year 2020, China and India will be emerged as the largest two economies of BRIC with GDP of 12,630 and 2,848 US\$ billions respectively.* For such emerging markets, identifying, retaining and engaging talent is of critical importance. Up-to what level employees are engaged, what they feel about their job and what things motivate them to contribute towards the organization, the present study focuses on this hot issue.

(ii) Data and Methodology

This study explores the employee engagement level in both these countries on the basis of the secondary data. These data have been taken from the report on *Employee Engagement Research Update (January 2013)* provided by Blessings White. It classifies the employees in five categories- **a) The Engaged; b) Almost Engaged; c) Honeymooners and Hamsters; d) Crash and Burners; e) The Disengaged.** When this model was analyzed closely, it is found that the model provides sufficient breadth and depth in classifying the employees on the basis of their engagement levels. It is more positive in nature and seems to be more based on HRD philosophy which believes that every individual who come into the organization has some potential to contribute for the organization subject to the condition that organization can provide them proper opportunities and recognition.

(iii) Employee Engagement in India and China: A Comparison

As far as overall engagement level in both the countries is concerned, we can see in the table-1 that in 2011 the overall engagement level in India (37%) was more than double of the engagement level in China (17%) and almost to double in the year 2012 i.e. 42% (India) and 22% (China) respectively.

Table-1: Engagement Level-Overall

Year	India	China
2011	37%	17%
2012	42%	22%

Source: Employee Engagement Research Update, Jan 2013 by Blessing White, p. 5

However, when we see the distribution of engagement on the basis of employee category (Table-2), it can be found that in India about 69% employees come to the engaged category. If we add the percentage of honeymooners and hamsters (9%) also in it, we see that around 80% of the

employees can bring to the engagement level. *It means that Indian companies have the possibility to engage their around 4/5th employees, only around 20% of the employees are inclined more towards the disengagement orientation.*

Table-2: Engagement - Level as per Employee Category

Employee Category	India	China
Engaged	42%	22%
Almost Engaged	27%	22%
Honeymooners & Hamsters	9%	18%
Crash & Burners	11%	14%
Disengaged	11%	24%

Source: Employee Engagement Research Update, Jan 2013 by Blessing White, p. 6

On the other hand, when employee engagement is analyzed on the basis of employee category (Table-2) **in China, it is found that only 44% of the employees have come up-to the engaged category** which is quite below in comparison to India (69%). It indicates that in Chinese companies more than half of the employees are presently not engaged. ***In fact, in China 24% of the employees are in the disengaged position*** which reflect that around ¼th of the employees in China feel that they are underutilized. They are not clear about their role and have very less opportunities to contribute towards organizational success. But as far as India is concerned, this disengaged portion is quite less (11%).

In the same lines when we analyze the percent of crash and burners which indicate that part of the employees who have not got proper recognition and opportunities to show their capabilities, we can see that there is not much difference between **India (11%) and China (14%)**. **It reflects that in spite of having potentials, caliber, skills and dedication;**

the employees of this part are not able to have engagement with the organization. Here the companies are at fault. This portion of employees may be quite harmful for the organization as such kind of employees may use their knowledge and skills in destructive manner in place of using it in constructive manner. They can also have an impact on the attitude of other employees, who are new in the organization like those who come under the category of honeymooners and hamsters.

The next table i.e. Table-3 describes the employees' perception towards their intention to stay in the organization. The table shows that India has shown an improvement of 9% in the year 2012 (68%) over the year 2011 (59%); however China has gained higher speed than India. It has an improvement of 12% in the employees' intention to stay in the organization in the year 2012 (67%) from 2011 (55%) but even then it is below India in terms of the employees' intention to stay in the organization.

Table-3: Employees' Intention to Stay

Options	India		China	
	2012	2011	2012	2011
Yes, Definitely	68%	59%	67%	55%
Probably	28%	33%	21%	29%
No Way	4%	8%	12%	16%

Source: Employee Engagement Research Update, Jan 2013 by Blessing White. p. 8

On the other hand, when we see the opposite aspect of employees' intention to stay in the organization, we find that there is certain percentage of employees who do not want to continue in their present organization at any cost. Those who do not feel their future in the same organization and are not able or interested to match their individual interest with organizational interest, come in the third category. In India, the percentage of the employees in this category is quite less (4% only in 2012) but in China it is three times higher than India (12%). However, in both the countries the situation has been improved by 4%, but even then China should have a great concern over it by looking at the percentage of disengaged employees in China i.e. 24% (Table-2). The middle part of the table no. 3 indicates the percentage of those employees who have some doubts regarding their continuation in the same organization. This percentage may be turned into the first category with proper care and recognition. But if they do not get right environment and right opportunities they may go in the third category of employees. Thus, to handle this portion of employees is highly essential. However, India has shown the improvement of 5% in this category from 2011 to 2012, even then in India, the percentage of this category is quite high

(28% in 2012) i.e. near about 1/3rd of the total employees have the thinking that they may or may not continue in the organization. Even in China also, the situation is not so good but at least it is better than India. It is 29% in 2011 and 21% in 2012 which means that Chinese companies has improved the satisfaction of its employees, as a result only around 1/5th portion of the total employees has come into this category.

After comparing the engagement levels of employees in both the countries, the next table (Table-4) presents the Satisfaction drivers of Engagement in India and China. People both in India and China give first preference to Career Development Opportunity and Training; secondly, they require more opportunity in what they do to satisfy their engagement levels. A clear contradiction is found in terms of the third satisfaction driver which portrays that employees in India prefer more challenging work whereas the ones in China need greater clarity about his work performance and career goals. So, despite have topographical, demographical and basic structure of organization different in both the countries, they share a lot of similarity in terms of satisfaction driver of engagement.

Table-4: Top 3 Satisfaction Drivers of Engagement

India	China
Career Development Opportunity and Training	Career Development Opportunity and Training
More Opportunities to do What He does Best	More Opportunities to do What He does Best
More Challenging Work	Greater Clarity about his Own Work Performance and Career Goals

Source: Employee Engagement Research Update, Jan 2013 by Blessing White, p. 17

On the other hand when we talk about top three contributing drivers of Engagement (Table-5), we come to know that Indian and Chinese employees have preferred the same drivers, but with the different rankings. Indian working population rates **Role Clarity** as the top driver which governs their contribution while people in China generally

rely and prefer **Regular, Specific Feedback** as their most preferred driver of engagement. Similarly, Developmental Opportunities and Training has got 3rd rank in India, while it is 2nd most important contribution driver for Chinese employees.

Table-5: Top 3 Contribution Drivers of Engagement

India	China
Role Clarity	Regular, Specific Feedback
Regular, Specific Feedback	Development Opportunities and Training
Development Opportunities and Training	Role Clarity

Source: Employee Engagement Research Update, Jan 2013 by Blessing White, p. 15

Discussion and Conclusion

While exploring the issue, the major finding indicates that both the countries have positive and increasing trends of employee engagement in subsequent years after 2010. As far as Indian economy is concerned, the global financial crisis of 2008 affected it adversely, but impact was not as severe as felt globally. As per the survey done by Labor Bureau of the Ministry of Labor and Employment (http://isidev.nic.in/pdf/ICSSR_TSP_PPS.pdf, p. 32), there was a loss of 5 lakhs jobs in the quarter October-December 2008, and, a gain of 2.8 lakhs jobs during the next quarter and again a loss of 1.3 lakh jobs during April-June 2009. However, after the slowdown in 2008-09, the Indian economy has experienced a robust and broad-based growth of 8.4 percent in 2009-10, mainly driven by a turnaround in the industrial output, and continued resilience of the service sector (<http://dget.gov.in/publications/annualreportemployment2011.pdf>, p.4). The Economic Survey 2011-12 identifies the service sector as the 'potential growth engine' (<http://dget.gov.in/publications/annualreportemployment2011.pdf>, p. 7). In the total GDP of 2010-11, agriculture, industry and service sectors have contributed 14.5%, 27.8% and 57.7% respectively (http://planningcommission.gov.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/wg_invest1807.pdf, p.7). Similarly, for China also, year 2008 has put great difficulty. Despite the great success of Olympic Games, some tragic

events like devastating wenchuan earthquake and global financial crisis posed daunting challenges for economic growth and employment generation (<http://www.adb.org/news/speeches/chinas-policy-response-global-financial-crisis>). However, the effect of global crisis on Chinese financial market is small as Li (2011, p. 64) has discussed that Chinese capital market was not completely open to international funds and Chinese banks had not purchased much subprime debts, hence the direct effect of crisis was not that much serious. However, its impact was very high on Chinese export market and it had slowed down very fast. As a result, Chinese job market was affected heavily and it produced about 30 million job lose in the first quarter of 2009. It had created an environment of low morale and thus affected the employees' morale and engagement negatively. However, with the recovery from global crisis and improvement of economies generated employment and stability, it increased.

But, simultaneously an interesting fact is brought about from the table-1 and 3 that on one side China is quite lagging behind than India in terms of overall engagement level, but when intention to stay in the organization is analyzed, both the countries are almost at the same level. The reason could be that engaged employees in China report more positive daily experiences (Gallup, State of the Global Workplace, 2013) for example, engaged workers in China are more

likely to say that they smiled or laughed a lot the previous day or they learned or did something interesting the previous day and less likely to have experienced stress or anger. It reflects that the employees who come under engaged category are happy with their lives in China. This is something of quite interest as it shows that Chinese companies use good work life balance practices to keep them their employees' morale high. This phenomenon can also be explained with the help of Herzberg's two factor theory of motivation (cited in Fugar, 2007) wherein in spite of low engagement level their intention to stay is high because of the presence of strong hygiene factors.

Further, in the report the employee engagement has been defined as the integration of satisfaction and contribution. Degree of satisfaction indicates the level to which a person likes his or her job and does it in well-manner, however contribution goes beyond it and links the individual efforts towards the achievement of organizational objectives. However, it is also not necessary that if a person has satisfaction, then he is contributing also. Table-4 discusses about top three drivers of satisfaction in the context of both India and China. Surprisingly, we can see that in both the countries people prefer almost the same drivers. They have the same perception and thought process wherein satisfaction is concerned and consider career development opportunity and training as one of the top most factors for driving satisfaction. As per the report of AON Hewitt' on employee engagement (2013), Indian employees have top priority to the career opportunities. One of the possible reasons may be the recovery of the economy from the financial crisis because at that time people were more concerned about their career development issues and path. Hence they have given it great importance. Further, when we see the top contribution drivers, we find that in both the countries, they are almost same. As far as Indian employees are concerned, they are much inclined towards role clarity. A role is the set of functions what a person performs while working in an organization. As per the findings, Indian employees want high degree of role clarity for being engaged. Indian culture has a medium low preference for avoiding uncertainty (<http://geert-hofstede.com/india.html>) which indicates that in India, there is acceptance of imperfection; nothing has to be perfect nor has to go exactly as planned. This kind of tendency may affect the employers' attitude towards giving regular and specific feedback. This may be one of the possible reasons why Indian employees consider the regular and specific feedback as one of the most important contributing drivers of employee engagement. Further, Indian culture ranks high on the power distance dimension indicating that the inequality of power, wealth, physical strength, and intellectual capacity is accepted by the population in India as a cultural norm and those, who have power, do everything possible to show it or heighten it,

and do not share it. As a result, supervisors in Indian companies feel powerful in having knowledge and ideas up-to themselves only. Thus, the subordinates may not be able to get clear role information. It may affect their job performance and development. This may be another possible reason why Indian employees give preference to role clarity and feedback. Similarly, when we analyze the Chinese employees' perception towards contributing drivers of engagement, it does not very much differ with Indian employees' perception. However, there is the difference in the priorities of the factors, which possibly exists because of the cultural differences. China is considered as a country with highly holistic and collectivist culture (<http://geert-hofstede.com/china.html>), where workers are required to understand their work in the light of shared group goals. In Chinese business two terms 'guanxi' means relationships and 'mianzi' means face are very important (<http://www.globoforce.com/gfblog/2014/recognizing-across-cultures-china/>). Chinese give high importance to their relationship and their face or image. In fact, in a collectivist culture like China, mianzi is as much about "giving face" or inviting others to share in a positive collective identity and to strengthen social relationships. For Chinese workers recognition is very important. It offers Chinese employees a clear way to give and receive mianzi (face). But it depends on two aspects, one is clear and defined role which leads to high performance and secondly, proper and timely feedback. However, it is also affected by the low uncertainty avoidance characteristic of Chinese culture. The Chinese are comfortable with ambiguity and adherence to laws and rules may be flexible to suit the actual situation (<http://geert-hofstede.com/china.html>). In such conditions, employees may get adjusted or manipulated feedback which affects their performance and engagement level.

Thus, through this study, we can conclude that both the countries India and China have increasing trend of employee engagement. However, India is above China as far as percentage of increase is concerned. Secondly, the satisfaction drivers and contribution drivers in India and China are also similar but they vary in preferences due to the presence of strong cultural factors. Indian organizations need to focus more on career development opportunities and training in order to retain their employees as India is still fighting for skilled workforce. On the other hand, with respect to motivation and high achievement, Indian companies need to work strongly towards role clarity aspect. With respect to Chinese organizations, they also need to focus more on career development opportunities and training in order to retain the employees while regular and specific feedback is essential to make them high achievers. Thus, in both the cases, human resource functions like job analysis, training and development, competency mapping

play a crucial role in order to retain as well as motivating the workforce and making them high performers. However, employee engagement is a subjective phenomenon and may be affected by the various demographic and socio-economic factors which have not been taken into consideration in the present study. Therefore in this area further studies can be done keeping into mind the above limitation.

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